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ABSTRACT

In fall 1995, Virginia's Mountain Empire Community College conducted a study to determine the reasons behind an unusually high rate of student attrition. Withdrawal forms were reviewed for all students who withdrew from all classes before the end of the semester and telephone surveys were conducted with a representative sample of the students. In addition, surveys were distributed to all faculty to determine their perceptions of the reasons for withdrawal and methods to reduce attrition. Study results included the following: (1) more females than males withdrew and students between the ages of 20 and 25 were 1.77 times more likely to withdraw than students 19 or younger; (2) on withdrawal forms, 33% of students cited work conflicts, while 32% cited personal or family illness as the reason for withdrawal; (3) few students cited the cost of tuition or books as relevant to their decision to withdraw; and (4) the two categories of causes cited by faculty were obstacles created by personal circumstances or traits, such as poor health or low self-esteem, and academic specific obstacles, such as poor preparation or study habits. Recommendations based on the findings included studying and intervening in the education of students who made no progress during their first semester, allowing departments to set their own retention goals, developing a college-wide attendance policy, and providing retention training to faculty. The survey instruments are appended. (HAA)

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Making Student Retention an Institutional Priority

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and Dr. Robert H. Sandel, President, MECC

A study was conducted to determine the reasons behind the unusually high rate of student attrition at Mountain Empire Community College. The results, which suggested that work and family conflicts were the primary contributors to attrition, led to the formation of a task force that was charged with the development of a comprehensive student retention plan. A collegewide retreat involving all faculty, staff, and administrators was scheduled to inform all constituents about the college's retention effort and to involve the entire college community in working together to understand how to implement effective retention strategies. Finally, a standing retention committee was formed at the college to oversee implementation of the retention plan.

Introduction

An institution committed to quality teaching and learning must also be committed to student retention, for neither teaching nor learning can occur in the absence of students. At Mountain Empire Community College, with an average 50 percent first-to-second-year dropout rate and a similarly high fall-to-spring semester dropout rate, student retention was identified in 1995 as an institutional priority. Since then, a study was conducted to determine why students drop out and how best to address the problem of attrition on campus. A task force was formed and charged with the development of a comprehensive retention plan, a retention retreat focused on ways to improve student retention was

conducted, and a standing retention committee was formed. The result is a comprehensive college plan for improving student retention that is being incrementally implemented and will be completely in place by the fall semester of 1997.

Methodology

Withdrawals Identified

In the fall of 1995, a study involving every student who either officially or unofficially withdrew from all classes before the end of the semester was conducted to determine the reasons students were not persisting. Students who officially withdrew were identified with an assigned grade of "W" in all courses, and students who unofficially withdrew were identified by the classroom instructors as having missed the last three consecutive weeks of scheduled class meetings.

It was determined that three distinct categories of withdrawals occurred in the 1995 fall semester: (1) official withdrawal prior to the census date, (2) withdrawal between the census date and the last official day to withdraw, and (3) unofficial withdrawal whereby students simply stopped attending classes. To identify reasons for withdrawal, official withdrawal forms used by the Admissions and Records Office were reviewed, and student responses to the question pertaining to reason for withdrawal were compiled. Responses were incomplete, however, and obviously no forms existed for those students who unofficially withdrew by ceasing to attend classes.

Telephone Survey

To acquire data on a representative sample of students who had withdrawn from classes, not just those who had completed the withdrawal form, a telephone survey was

conducted by faculty and staff volunteers. Students identified as having either officially or unofficially withdrawn from all classes in the 1995 fall semester were telephoned and asked to respond to ten questions about their reasons for deciding not to complete the term. The suggested script for the telephone survey and the questionnaire administered to each interviewee are included as appendices.

Faculty Opinion Survey

To ascertain faculty perspectives on student retention, all faculty, including librarians, counselors, and administrators, were asked to complete a faculty opinion survey. The form asked for faculty perceptions about a number of relevant issues, including the reasons for student attrition, techniques employed to prevent attrition, and actions the college should take to increase retention. Approximately 70 percent responded. The survey instrument is included as an appendix.

In the spring of 1996 a retention task force was formed and given the charge of reviewing all attrition/retention data collected during the fall semester and using that information as the basis for formulating a plan to increase student retention among all student populations, both on and off campus.

Factors Affecting Attrition

Gender

Studies show that pre-enrollment variables, including gender and age as well as high school grade point average and enrollment goals, are good predictors of attrition (Feldman, 1993). More females than males withdrew between the census date and the last official day to withdraw--weeks 2-10 of the semester. Mountain Empire Community

College enrolled students in the fall of 1995 at a male to female ratio of 1 to 1.7. They withdrew, however, at a ratio of 1 to 2.44 respectively. Findings of other studies vary with regard to the relationship between gender and persistence. While some studies suggest no relationship, two (Voorhees, 1987; Feldman, 1993) suggest that females are more likely to persist than males.

Age

Age has also been identified as a factor affecting student persistence. Feldman (1993) found that students aged 20 - 24 were 1.77 times more likely to drop out than students aged 19 or younger. The results of the MECC study supported this finding, with students aged 20-25 constituting the largest percentage of withdrawals by age group. Students aged 36 and older represented the next highest percentage of withdrawals (see chart).

Age	% Withdrawal
<=19	13
20-25	45
26-35	14
>=36	28

In looking at when students are most likely to withdraw from classes, anecdotal wisdom was confirmed; it was found that the majority of students wait until the eleventh hour--just prior to the official deadline--to withdraw. Fifty-seven percent of students in the MECC study withdrew during weeks nine and ten of the fall semester.

Work and Family

Data collected from the withdrawal forms and the telephone survey revealed that students withdrew from college for sundry reasons, including everything from loss of income to loss of transportation to loss of interest. Two predominant and conflicting commitments, however, were cited most frequently as reasons for discontinuing classes: work and family. More than 60 percent of students surveyed by phone indicated that they were employed while attending MECC. The review of withdrawal forms revealed that 33 percent of students listed work conflicts as the reason for withdrawal, and approximately the same percentage of students surveyed by phone concurred. Similarly, 32 percent of students cited personal or family illness on withdrawal forms, and 24 percent of phone respondents attributed their withdrawal to personal or family conflicts.

Varying Educational Goals

As might be expected in community college, a relatively small percentage (32%) of students surveyed had the completion of a degree, certificate, or diploma as their primary educational goal. Many were taking transfer or job-related courses. Some were enrolled for personal interest or to explore possible career options. The fact that the goal of most students was something other than completing a degree caused the retention task force to begin their work by defining retention for MECC, thereby enabling future data collection to more accurately distinguish between dropouts and those who left after completing their short-term educational goals.

Seemingly due to the high percentage of financial aid recipients at MECC (85%), few students surveyed cited the cost of tuition and fees or books and supplies as relevant

to their decision to discontinue classes at the college. And the cost of child care was a significant factor for only 6 percent of students surveyed.

Personal and Academic Obstacles

Faculty identified many of the same reasons for attrition that students cited, but faculty also perceived that attrition results from problems with student immaturity, lack of goals, and poor academic preparation. Faculty responses to the question, "What do you perceive as the primary reasons for attrition among our students?" were divided into two categories: (1) obstacles created by personal circumstances or traits and (2) academic specific obstacles. Tinto (1975) noted that among the most serious problems with which at-risk students must contend are those created by family background (social status, values, expectations), individual attributes (sex, race, ability), and precollege schooling (GPA, academic and social attainments)." Obstacles of personal circumstances or traits cited by faculty included health, marital, financial, transportation, and child care problems; low motivation; low self-esteem; employment changes; no, wrong, or unrealistic goals; and immaturity. Academic specific obstacles cited included poor academic preparation, poor study habits, low grades, poor advising, inadequate orientation, heavy class loads, poor class attendance, and lack of awareness of the demands of college. In this study, students more often cited external influences whereas faculty more often cited internal influences as the most relevant determinant of attrition.

Student-Faculty Relationship

Student-faculty interaction has been found to have a stronger relationship to student satisfaction with the college experience than any other variable. From a survey of 944 two- and four-year public and private colleges and universities, all types of institutions

considered the "caring attitude of faculty and staff" to be the most important retention factor at their institution (Roueche, 1993). MECC faculty were asked what techniques they employ to promote retention in their roles as academic advisors and instructors. As academic advisors, faculty reported giving their advisees encouragement and support; helping them to define their goals; sending them notes, phoning them, visiting them; discussing the results of dropping out; emphasizing class attendance, and referring advisees to counselors and tutors. A frequently reported retention technique employed in the classroom that overlapped one used in academic advisement was the provision of encouragement and support to students. Other techniques cited by instructors included teaching a quality course; providing out-of-class assistance; making the course relevant to life; making accommodations and exceptions when warranted; administering more tests and quizzes to provide ongoing feedback about student progress; and making the classroom student centered.

Retention Task Force

Faculty opinions about what actions the college should take to increase retention were also obtained from the faculty survey. The prevailing opinion was that the college needed a comprehensive retention plan, and it was suggested that a retention task force be formed to construct such a plan.

In the 1996 spring semester, a retention task force representative of all college constituents was formed and was charged with the development of a retention plan for the college. They began their work by reviewing the different ways in which retention is defined at other institutions, then developing a working definition for retention at

Mountain Empire Community College. It was decided that enrollment in the subsequent semester would constitute persistence, and completion of two-thirds of courses attempted with a 2.0 or higher grade point average would constitute academic achievement. Data collected by the task force indicated that over a five year period, nearly 700 students had earned a grade point average of 0.0 during their initial semester. The task force recommended that the college study this group of students who make no academic progress during their first semester and that intervention strategies be developed to help them succeed. Other task force recommendations included the following:

- Departments and divisions should be encouraged to set their own retention goals.
- A college-wide attendance policy should be developed, or faculty should be encouraged to take class attendance so that students having attendance problems can be identified.
- A process for monitoring student behaviors associated with failure (e.g., excessive absenteeism, failing grades, failure to turn in assignments, etc.) should be developed, and intervention strategies should be employed to help these at-risk students succeed.
- The orientation program should be evaluated and revised as appropriate to better prepare students for the college experience and to help them develop attainable academic and career goals.
- The academic advisement process should be strengthened.
- Faculty should be encouraged to devise a written plan on how they intend to incorporate retention strategies into their classroom interaction and other interaction with students.

- Faculty should be encouraged to plan more out-of-class contacts for students, such as study groups, peer tutoring, collaborative projects, etc.
- Student participation in college sponsored activities and organizations should be more strongly encouraged.
- Faculty advisors should receive training in how to work with and/or refer advisees who have difficulty with goal setting, grades, commitment, or attendance.

The task force also rightly recognized and recommended that MECC's retention plan should be comprehensive, involving all faculty, staff, and administrators, as well as students. In addition, it was recommended that the college establish a standing retention committee to oversee the retention plan and to continue the study of factors related to retention. Finally, the task force recommended that a college-wide retention goal--defined in terms of both persistence and academic achievement--be set, and that progress toward that goal be continually monitored and evaluated through data collection and analysis.

Retention Retreat

To inform all faculty and staff about the college's retention effort and to involve the entire college community in working together to understand how to implement effective retention strategies, a Virginia Community College System research grant was sought, and funding was obtained to sponsor a retention retreat. The purpose of the retreat was to bring all faculty, staff, and administrators together in a relaxing setting away from campus to learn and discuss, as equals, how to do a better job of retaining students at Mountain Empire Community college. A workshop leader was brought in to share her expertise on the subject of retention and, more importantly, to facilitate discussion about

student retention among MECC participants. The two-day retreat, which was held just prior to the beginning of fall semester, 1996, was a huge success. (Retreat agenda and evaluation forms are attached as appendices.) Participant responses were very favorable, and the enthusiasm generated during the retreat fueled retention activities back on campus, such as a workshop for adjunct faculty in October that focused on classroom strategies for improving student retention.

Standing Committee on Retention

The formation of a standing college committee on retention and the president's identification of retention as a college priority have helped to sustain collegewide interest and enthusiasm. The standing retention committee is fleshing out the skeletal plan that was developed by the retention task force, and a document describing MECC's complete retention plan is currently being developed. This plan will undoubtedly include most, if not all, of the recommendations of the task force. Several of those recommendations have already been implemented. For example, permanent name tags were purchased for all full-time faculty and staff, and these name tags are being worn by all during the first three weeks of each semester to make it easier for students to identify college personnel to assist them. Further, a thorough review of the student orientation program revealed deficiencies, so a new retention-conscious orientation program was developed and will be in place by spring semester, 1997. Finally, a buddy system is being developed that will encourage more frequent interaction between students and MECC faculty and staff. Each retention effort is being monitored for effectiveness, and necessary modifications will be identified by the committee.

Implications and Conclusion

The mission of Mountain Empire Community College is to provide quality educational programs and services to the citizens of our region, but we believe that simply making those programs and services available is not enough. We also have an obligation to help students find ways to overcome obstacles that too often cause them to abandon their educational goals. We must make every possible effort to create a staying environment for our students. Creating that staying environment involves identifying factors that cause students to drop out, then responding as an institution in appropriate ways to foster student retention.

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FACULTY RETENTION SURVEY

1. Approximately what percentage of students in any given class you teach either officially withdraws or simply stops attending classes before the end of the semester?

2. Is the percentage of non-persisting students higher in fall, spring, or summer semester, or does the percentage remain relatively constant regardless of the semester?

3. What do you perceive as the primary reasons for attrition among our students?

4. Do you believe a student's curriculum, enrollment status (full-time or part-time), employment status (employed or unemployed), or similar factors influence attrition?

5. What techniques or approaches do you employ as an *advisor* to encourage students to persist toward completion of their academic goals?

6. What techniques or approaches do you employ as an *instructor* to encourage students to persist toward completion of their academic goals?

7. What actions do you think the College should take (short-term and long-term) to increase student retention?

Suggested Script for Phone Survey

Hello. My name is _____, and I'm calling from Mountain Empire Community College. We are conducting a short survey of students who began classes at the college this fall but have since withdrawn or stopped attending. Is this (first and last name)? [OR] May I please speak with (first and last name)?

May I ask you a few questions about your experience at Mountain Empire Community College? Thank you.

1. When you enrolled at MECC, what was your main educational goal? (Check one or record the student's answer under "other")

___ Take one or more job-related courses
___ Take a few courses to explore career options
___ Take courses to transfer to a four-year college or university
___ Obtain an associate degree, certificate, or diploma
___ Don't know
___ No answer
___ Other (specify)_____

2. While you were attending MECC, did you receive financial aid?

___ Yes
___ No

3. Why did you decide not to complete the fall semester at MECC? (Check all that apply)

___ Got a job
___ Work schedule conflict
___ Personal or family illness
___ Relocated
___ Transferred to another college/university
___ Tuition too expensive
___ Related costs (e.g., books, fees, travel, child care) too expensive
___ Financial aid not available
___ Dissatisfied with courses/teaching
___ Desired courses/programs not available
___ Obtained job skills, knowledge needed
___ Don't know
___ No answer
___ Other (specify)_____

4. Are there courses or program you would take if they were offered by the College?

___ Yes
___ No

5. How important was the cost of tuition and fees in your decision to discontinue classes at MECC?

___ Very important
___ Somewhat important
___ Not important at all

6. How important was the cost of books and materials in your decision not to continue?

___ Very important
___ Somewhat important
___ Not important at all

7. How important was the cost of child care in your decision?

___ Very important
___ Somewhat important
___ Not important at all

8. How important was the availability of financial aid in your decision?

___ Very important
___ Somewhat important
___ Not important at all

9. When you were attending MECC, did you work?

___ Yes (full-time or part-time?)
___ No

10. Do you plan to attend college at a later date?

___ Yes (If so, when and where?)
___ No

That concludes my questions. Thank you for participating, and if MECC can be of service to you in the future, don't hesitate to call.